

“GOD IS LIKE...”

DEUTERONOMY 31:30-32:12
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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If you're like me, it takes a while to get back into the rhythm of regular life once you return from holidays.

So, I'm going to need some help with the sermon this morning. In a minute.

Those who know me well know that the question of how we think about God—the image of God that we walk around with every day—is very important to me.

So many of us have partial or inadequate or even false and damaging images of God bouncing around in our heads and this does untold damage in our lives.

But it's not always easy to get a clear image of God in our heads. There are so many mixed messages to contend with, so many different pictures of God that we accumulate over time, from our reading of the Bible, from teachers and pastors, from popular culture, etc.

Not all of these images are good or healthy or accurate or faithful to the broad narrative of Scripture.

The Bible gives us a whole catalogue of images and pictures for God, but sometimes we only focus on a few.

So, we're going to talk about metaphors today. Here's where I need some help.

Who can dig around in their distant or more recent memory of language or English class and tell me what a metaphor is? Or, who can tell me the difference between a metaphor and a simile?

[Simile = comparison using like or as; metaphor = a more direct comparison using “is”]

Metaphors, it turns out, are one of the primary ways that Scripture reveals God to us. They are the way that we learn what God is like.

(Scripture also uses metaphors to talk about what we are like... More on that next week.)

Ok, I need some help again. We're going to pool our collective wisdom and see how many metaphors for God we can come up with.

I have my own partial list that I'm going to put up in a minute, but before I do, what are some of the images of God that we can think of in Scripture? What are the metaphors that you are familiar with and gravitate towards?

- Eagle (Deuteronomy 32:11)
- Shepherd (John 10:11)
- Dove (Matthew 3:16; John 1:32 – referring to the “Spirit of God”)
- Warrior (Exodus 15:3; Judged 6:12; Isaiah 42:13)
- Bear (Hosea 13:8)
- Lion (Jeremiah 50:44; Hosea 5:14; Revelation 5:5) *Ironically, the devil is also described as a lion in 1 Peter 5:8!*
- Hen (Matthew 23:37)
- Bridegroom (Luke 5:34-35)
- Bread of Life (John 6:35)
- Potter (Isaiah 64:8; Jeremiah 18:6)
- Vine (John 15:5)
- Shoot from a Stump (Isaiah 11:1)
- Mother (Isaiah 49:15)
- Consuming Fire (Exodus 24:17; Deuteronomy 4:24)
- Father (Matthew 6:9 – Lord’s Prayer)
- Friend (Matthew 11:19 – “Friend of Sinners”; John 15:15 – “I have called you friends”)
- King (Psalm 145:1)
- ROCK (Deuteronomy 32:4, 18; 1 Corinthians 10:4)

It's an interesting mix, isn't it? Some of the metaphors are borrowed from the language of human relationships (king, mother, father, brother), some come from the nonhuman creation (in keeping with our summer theme).

Each of these metaphors is partial. None of them exhausts the content of who God is, but they each communicate something important about what God is like and how God relates to us.

Hans Boersma:

[Metaphors] are a divinely given means to avoid idolatrous claims of knowledge. Metaphors are nonliteral descriptions of reality. They are an acknowledgement that we need to access the world around us in an indirect fashion, and that the idea of direct and complete access is an arrogant illusion that violates the multifaceted integrity of the created world.¹

This is a fancy academic way of saying that God communicates via metaphors to accommodate to our limitations as human beings. Our finite brains can never understand the mystery of God in its totality. God gives us metaphors to give us glimpses, and to keep us humble.

Sally McFague puts it a bit more simply:

[A] metaphor is seeing one thing as something else, pretending 'this' is that 'that' because we do not know how to think or talk about 'this,' so we use 'that' a way of saying something about it.²

So, metaphors are a crucial way in which we come to know who God is and how God works in the world.

On to our text from Deuteronomy.

The context is a song. It is a song of Moses that retells the story of Israel and her covenant with God as they stand on the plains of Moab east of the Jordan River, before they have ever set foot in the land promised to them.

They have been wandering in the wilderness for forty years. They have seen the mighty acts of deliverance from their God, the parting of seas, the bread from heaven, etc.

¹ Hans, Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2004), 104.

² Sally McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 15.

They have also stumbled in sin and disobedience and idolatry, and suffered for their sin (the incident with the golden calf).

The whole book of Deuteronomy is actually a series of sermons whereby Moses retells Israel's story, rehearses their covenantal obligations, and, most importantly, reminds them of the character and promise of their God.

Moses' words are stern. He calls his people to repentance and a renewed commitment to follow their God.

But behind, above, and around these stern words of warning—in this chapter and throughout the whole book—is a metaphor.

The metaphor is of God as a rock.

Deuteronomy 32:4

*I will proclaim the name of the LORD.
Oh, praise the greatness of our God!
4 He is the Rock, his works are perfect,
and all his ways are just.
A faithful God who does no wrong,
upright and just is he.*

[Hold up a rock.]

Our kids have long been rock collectors. Ever since they were very small, I can remember finding pebbles and stones.

I think many of us have a fascination with rocks.

But why would this serve as a metaphor for God?

- Are we comparing God to the shape of a rock?
- Texture?
- Colour?
- Inanimateness?

Probably not.

So why is a rock such a powerful and dependable a metaphor for God?

[Wait for answers.]

I think it is the solidity of stones that makes the metaphor work. They are indestructible, unmoving.

They speak to us of things that do not change in a world where almost everything else around is *always* changing.

The ancient philosopher Heraclitus argued said that reality simply *is* change. He is famous for saying that “you cannot step twice into the same river.” The river is always changing, always moving, never the same, moment to moment.

Our experience of life bears this out.

Our bodies are always growing and changing from moment to moment. In the time it takes me to speak this sentence, 50 million of my cells will have died and been replaced by others!

Our lives are always changing—people come in and out of our lives, we live in various places, we do different things—and as we do, we change.

Change can be bewildering... intimidating... confusing... disorienting.

One of the most obvious ways this is true is in the world of technology.

The other day my grandmother left a comment on my blog.

Her comment got me to thinking about the truly astonishing amount of change she has witnessed in her lifetime! From the days when written communication could take weeks or months to arrive to clicking a button a keyboard and having them instantly accessible around the globe! Incredible.

Having said that, she used her comment on my blog to correct my grammar, which proves, I suppose, that in a world of near constant change, some things are *absolutely, steadfastly reliable* 😊.

The experience of unending change is one of the most frequently noted features of the postmodern world.

We are more aware than ever, so we think, of the fact that our understanding of what true is profoundly influenced by our social context.

We are aware of many different perspectives, of the many people who see things differently. We are aware of the ways in which those who have claimed to have “the truth” have used this to abuse and oppress others (think of the Residential Schools, or countless other examples).

We are aware that other people read the same bible that we do and come to different conclusions (this is one of the things that Mennonite Church Canada is currently wrestling with in our *Being a Faithful Church* process).

The things that once seemed sure are not longer sure, at least not in the same way.

In the midst of all this change, we need something solid. We need a rock that does not move when everything else around seems to be in perpetual motion.

This is why rocks appeal to us. This is why the metaphor works.

In a world where the justice we experience is always partial and inconsistent, God’s justice is reliable and true, and will one day be fully realized.

In a world where our relationships with fragile, sinful human beings are characterized by mixed motives and suspicion, where we let each other down and betray each other, God’s dealings with us are always for good, for wholeness, and for a hopeful future.

In a world where nothing lasts, where everything is prone to decay, God is the Alpha and Omega, the same yesterday, today, and forever.

In a world where we continually tell partial truths and break our promises to God and each other, God’s commitment to us never wavers.

In a world where we are faithless and fickle, God is faithful to his covenant partners.

In a world where everything else seems fragile and crumbles far too easily, our God is a solid rock.

A final word.

It is important to note that God is the rock, not our *beliefs about God*.

This is a subtle, but crucially important distinction—one that many people do not make.

Our conceptions of God can and do change over time. Thank God!

Few of us think of God in exactly the same way in our later years as we did when we were ten year olds.

When I was a child, I probably thought of God as a kind of Santa Claus in the sky. I no longer think of God in this way. My view of God has changed over time, as I have experienced the peaks and valleys of relating to this God, as I have learned what the world is like and how God seems to interact with his world. Hopefully, my view of God has grown in the right direction over these last thirty or so years.

To the extent that the God I believe in and follow looks like Jesus, I think it has!

And I expect that when I'm fifty-five or seventy-five or whatever, my view of God will look different than it does today. I hope my image of God continues to grow and mature and learn as I grow and learn and mature.

And I think the same is true for all of us. Or it can be.

But the important thing to remember, is that our beliefs *about* God are not God. We might think they are a direct match, but they're not.

Our views of God are *always* coloured by our limitations and by our sin, by our fears and prejudices and also by our deepest longings and most inspiring experiences.

We are called to simply to continue to look at the person and work of Jesus, and to trust that the God who has called us is faithful and has given us enough to go on in this life to live faithfully and honestly before him and others.

In the NT, Jesus himself is described as a "rock."

Jesus urges his listeners to build their lives upon the rock, upon his life and teachings, not on sinking sand (Mat. 7:24-29).

Paul, quoting the prophet Isaiah in Romans 9, describes Jesus as the stone that causes unbelievers to stumble, and that those who believe in this rock will never be put to shame" (Romans 9:33).

Later, in his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul describes Jesus as "the spiritual rock" that followed the Israelites in the wilderness.

If we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, we can trust that our beliefs about God, while not comprehensive and perfect, will be headed in the right direction.

Now, some homework for you.

A few more weeks of summer beckon. Many of us will spend some of this time in the mountains. Or we will find ourselves at lake and oceans with plenty of stones upon the shore.

The next time you gaze up at these magnificent chunks of rock and tree or lean over to collect stones along the rivers and lakes and oceans we visit, I invite you to go beyond appreciating the stunning beauty of God's creation. I invite you to pause, even if just for a minute, to let these mountains and rocks and pebbles serve as a metaphor for the rock of our salvation.

Stop, and thank God for the many and diverse metaphors he has seen fit to give us to remind us of his unchanging, solid character, of his fidelity to his creation, of his faithfulness to you, personally.

And finally, but certainly not less importantly, ask God to continually use whatever metaphor is necessary to draw us back to greater faithfulness, deeper trust, stronger love for God and neighbour, and more confident hope.

May God help us to remember this Rock.

May God help us, as the song of Moses reminds us, to never tire of proclaiming the greatness of our God.

Amen.

